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WASHINGTON POST
12 February 1984

Margin For Terror

THE TIME OF THE ASSASSINS*By Claire Sterling.
Holt, Rinehart and Winston. 264 pp. \$14.95

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IN THE WAKE of most assassination attempts against political leaders, especially charismatic ones, there usually is some element of doubt about what really happened and why. In the case of the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II on May 13, 1981, the level of doubt far exceeds the level of certainty.

At the center of the controversy is the issue of whether the self-confessed assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca, acted alone or with the help and under the influence of the Soviet Union. As early as September 1981, the Italian judge who sentenced Agca to life imprisonment concluded that "Agca was no more than the emerging point of a deep conspiracy, complex and threatening, orchestrated by secret forces, carefully planned and directed down to the smallest detail." But the evidence to back up this conclusion has never really come to light from government sources. The closest we will probably get to seeing some of it is by reading Claire Sterling's new book, *The Time of the Assassins*.

Sterling has two stories to tell. The first is about the assassin and how he might have come to be manipulated by the KGB. The second story is about why and how unnamed noncommunist intelligence officials appeared to cover up for their KGB "brothers-in-arms." "The more telling the evidence of the Soviet role coming to light," Sterling writes, "the more resolutely they discounted it." Who lied and why turned out to be the "story of a lifetime." In fact, the book is not that sensational. Rather it is an extremely well-written account of a veteran reporter's energy, imagination and frustration in following up every lead and leak.

The starting point for Sterling's work on this case was a contract from *Reader's Digest*: "Spend as much as you must to get as close to the truth as you can." The magazine also contracted with Paul Henze, who served on the staff of the National Security Council during the Carter administration and who conducted a separate investigation. Henze's book, *The Plot to Kill the Pope*, reaches virtually the same conclusions about the role of the KGB as does Sterling.

When it comes to the Soviet Union and especially the operations of the KGB, the *Reader's Digest* has a definite axe to grind, as does Sterling. She makes very clear from her tone that she started out believing that the Soviets were behind the attempt on the pope and that her mission was to uncover as much as their tracks as possible.

What struck her most and very early in her own investigation was that only the Italians appeared interested in finding out how deeply Moscow might have been involved. The more they (and she) probed, the more the circumstances surrounding Agca's travels, finances and

behavior indicated that he had not and could not have acted alone. And by the winter of 1983, the Italian authorities had charged seven people with complicity in the assassination attempt.

The Italian police were guided in making these charges and some arrests by clues Agca had given in pre-trial and subsequent interrogations. Sterling admits that Agca is a "practiced liar" and he has changed his story several times not only about the assassination attempt on the pope but also about other terrorist activities in which he has been involved. Consequently, the Italian officials who investigated the leads Agca gave them often encountered disbelief and ridicule. According to Sterling, unnamed CIA officers and other U.S. and European government officials have consistently maintained that Agca was "a crazy" and therefore too

unreliable for really professional intelligence operatives (such as those in the service of the KGB) to include in an assassination plot.

Sterling uncovers too much to leave such views unchallenged. She builds "a solid circumstantial case" that Turkey was a fertile ground in which to nurture an assassin, that Agca thought of himself as a terrorist and that throughout his career he had numerous sources of help from countries (especially Bulgaria) and criminal organizations involved in terrorism.

She also builds a good case for why Moscow was frightened by the pope. John Paul was apparently seen as a harbinger of instability to Poland (Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko said in 1979 that the pope's travel to Poland "would have the same effect on the masses as the Ayatollah Khomeini had in Iran") and throughout Eastern Europe. He was regarded as the instigator of an equally threatening religious revival in the Ukrainian and Lithuanian republics.

Having set this context, Sterling suggests why it is conceivable that, once KGB director Yuri Andropov became the Soviet leader in November 1982, it might have been in the interest of the United States and other governments to remain silent if he had ordered the pope killed. There was the hope that fall and winter, she reports, that Andropov would prove a leader with whom the West and especially the U.S. president could deal. Some maintained that Andropov (who prob-

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